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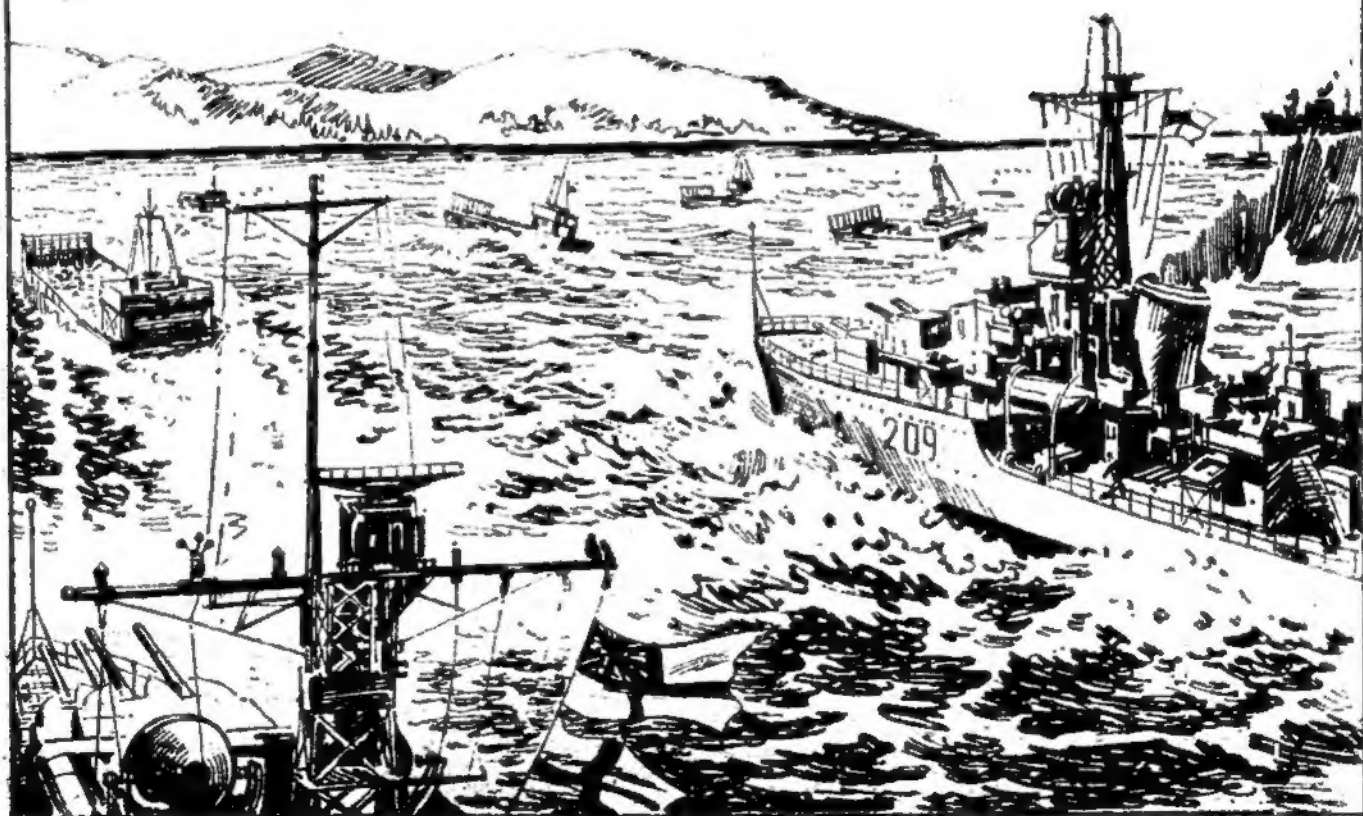
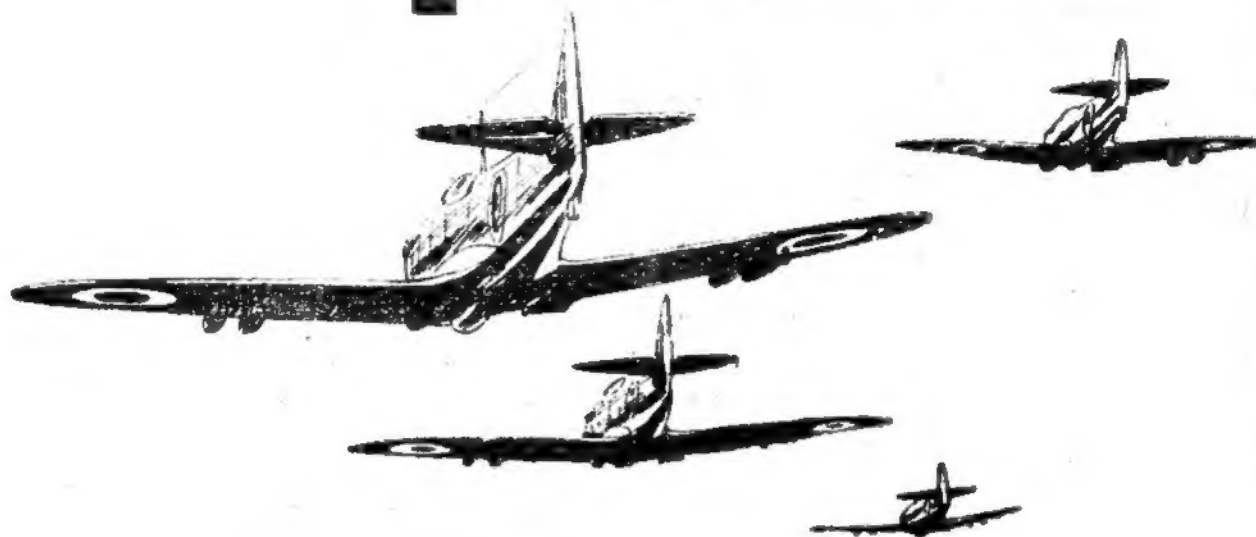
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Combined Operation



Chapter 1. **THREE MEN IN A BOAT**

BY THE SPRING OF 1943, NORTH AFRICA HAD BEEN CLEARED OF THE AXIS FORCES BY THE GALLANT EIGHTH ARMY. ROMMEL'S ONCE-GLORIOUS AFRIKA KORPS WAS A SULLEN RABBLE BEHIND BARBED WIRE.



OVER THE DESERT, AN EERIE SILENCE HAD FALLEN. HERE, WHERE GREAT ARMIES HAD FOUGHT FOR EVERY BLOODSTAINED YARD OF ARID SOIL, THE SAND NOW DRIFTED OVER THE WRECKED TANKS AND SMASHED GUNS, THE IRON FLOTSAM LEFT BY THE RECEDING TIDE OF WAR.



BUT EUROPE STILL LAY HELPLESS UNDER THE NAZI JACKBOOT. THE BATTLE MUST GO ON. ALREADY IN PORT SAID, THE VICTORIOUS EIGHTH ARMY WAS EMBARKING FOR THE ATTACK ON THE SOFT UNDER-BELLY OF HITLER'S EUROPEAN STRONGHOLD.



WATCHING THE HEAVILY-LADEN VETERANS CLIMB THE GANGWAY TO THE DECK OF THE *PATHAN* WERE THREE MEN... A SAILOR, AN AIRMAN AND A SOLDIER...

THEY'RE A TOUGH-LOOKING BUNCH, BY GUM! I WOULDN'T FANCY FIGHTING THEM, WOULD YOU, MATE?



Combined Operation

AIRCRAFTMAN GEORDIE WALKER WAS A FITTER...THE HEROIC PILOTS OF THE R.A.F. PUT THEIR LIVES IN GRIMY HANDS LIKE HIS EVERY TIME THEY TOOK A PLANE OFF THE GROUND, BUT GEORDIE MADE NO CLAIM TO BE A HERO. NEITHER DID STEWARD HILL OF THE ROYAL NAVY...



THE CHEERFUL VOICES OF JOE AND GEORDIE SEEMED TO STING THE BURLY SOLDIER WHO HAD BEEN GLUMLY WATCHING THE FIGHTING MEN COME ABOARD.



SAPPER BULLER OF THE ROYAL ENGINEERS HAD AN OLD GRIEVANCE...

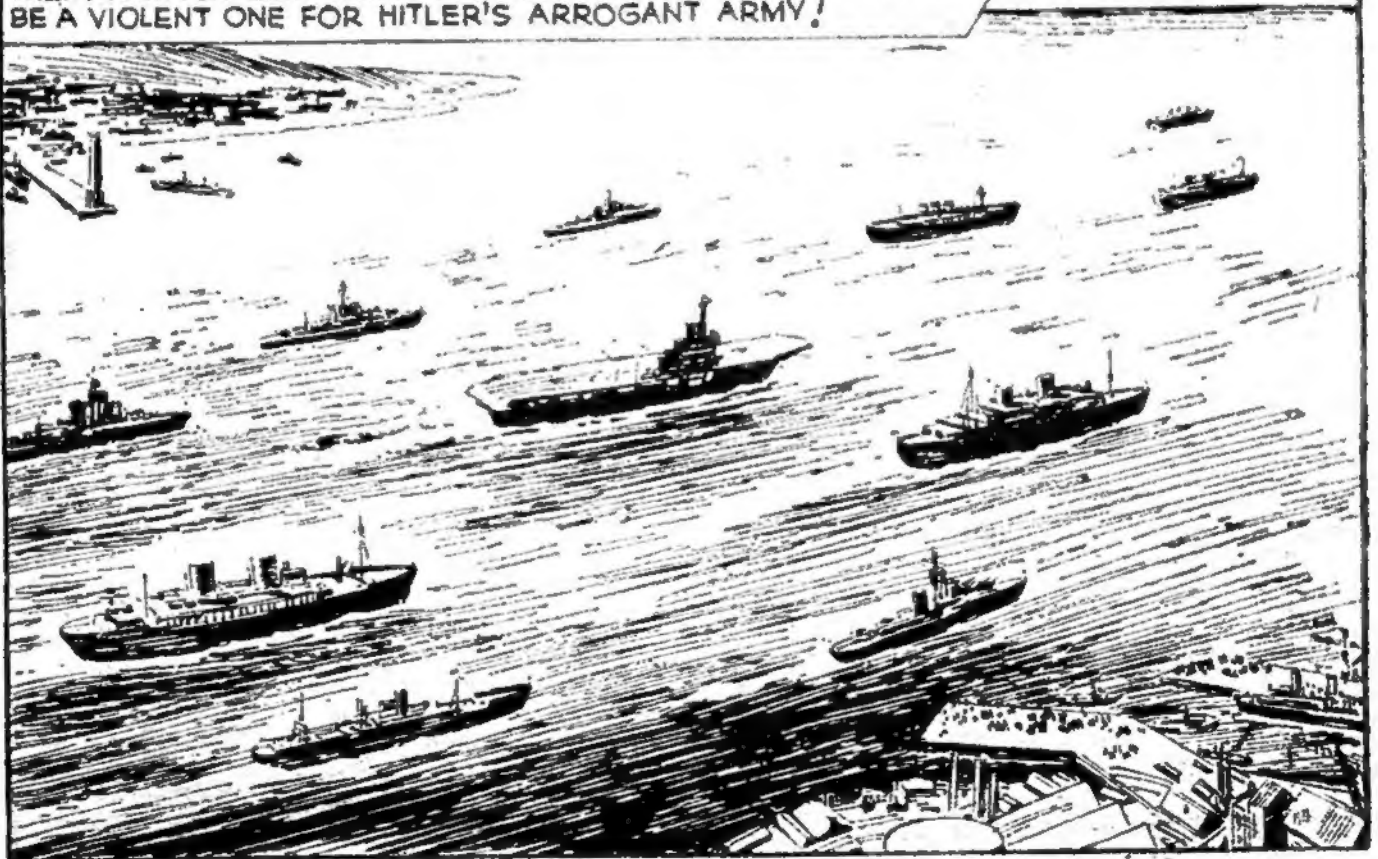
ROYAL ENGINEERS! BULLER'S THE NAME. BUILDING RUDDY BRIDGES, LAYING ROADS, DIGGING DRAINS, THAT'S ALL I'VE DONE SINCE THEY POSTED ME! AND IT'LL BE THE SAME WHEN WE GET TO... WHEREVER THEY'RE SENDING US THIS TIME!



WHILE THE THREE MEN HAD BEEN TALKING, THE LAST SOLDIER HAD CLIMBED THE GANGPLANK. THE PATHAN WAS READY TO SAIL WITH THE REST OF THE INVASION FLEET... TO A DESTINATION WHICH WAS STILL SECRET!



OUT INTO THE MEDITERRANEAN PLOUGHED THE TROOPSHIPS AND THEIR WHIPPET-LIKE ESCORTS. THEIR NEXT LANDFALL WOULD BE A VIOLENT ONE FOR HITLER'S ARROGANT ARMY!



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ALL DAY THE SHIPS HEADED NORTHWARD. IN THE FIRST DOG WATCH, SAPPER BULLER AND AIRCRAFTMAN WALKER SAW A LANKY FIGURE WALKING PURPOSEFULLY ACROSS THE TROOP-DECK OF THE PATHAN...



CURIOUS, GEORDIE AND THE BURLY SAPPER WATCHED THE NAVAL STEWARD DISAPPEAR BEHIND A LIFEBOAT SLUNG ON ITS DAVITS. WHEN THEY FOLLOWED HIM...



Combined Operation

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DIRECTLY THE CONVOY HAD REACHED THE OPEN SEA, THE OFFICERS WERE CALLED TO THE WARDROOM OF EACH TROOPSHIP. THERE, THE CAREFULLY-GUARDED SECRET OF THE INVASION FLEET'S DESTINATION WAS REVEALED...

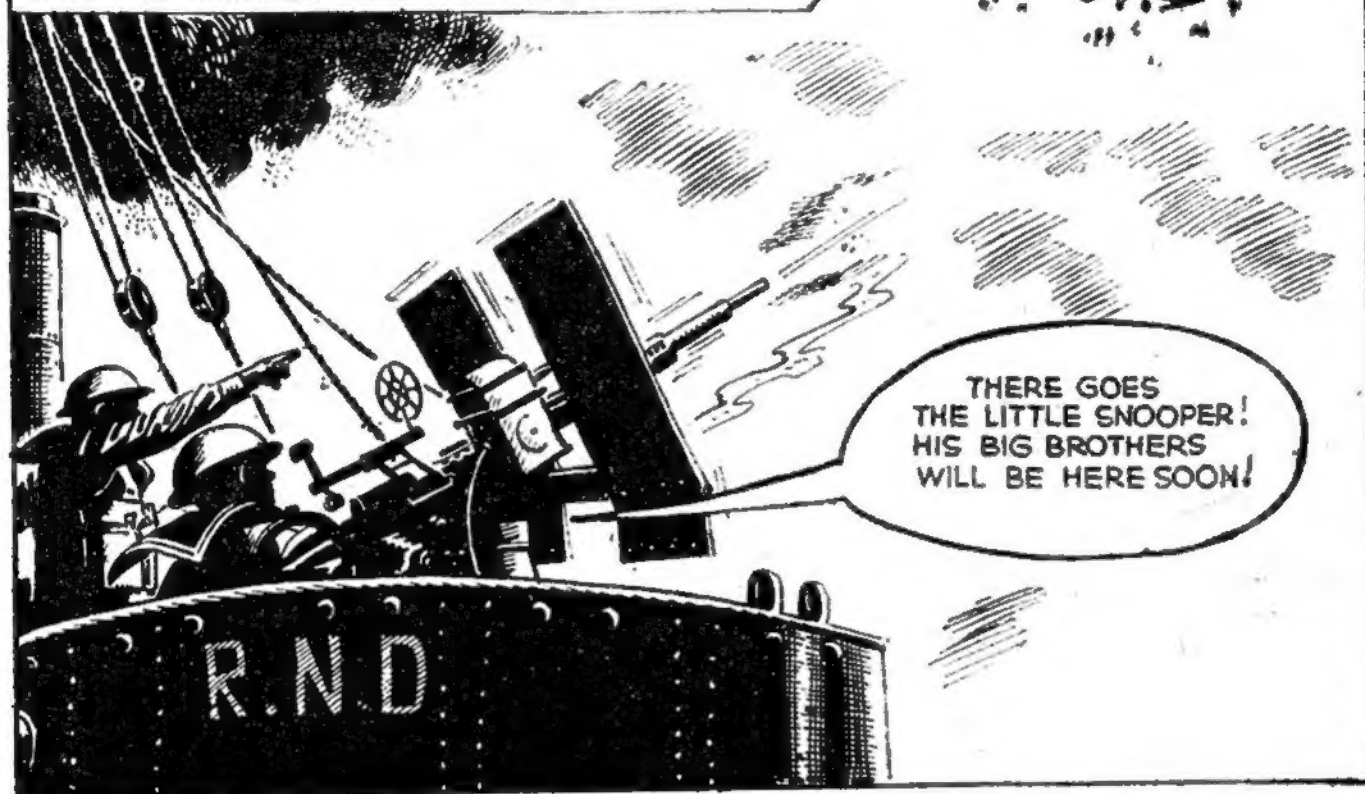


HIDDEN FROM BAWLING NON-COMS, READY ON THE CARLEY FLOAT FOR ANY EMERGENCY, THE THREE NEW-FOUND FRIENDS PASSED THE VOYAGE IN PERFECT PEACE. BUT ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE FIFTH DAY...



Combined Operation

A SMALL GERMAN RECONNAISSANCE PLANE HAD BEEN PATROLLING LAZILY AT FOUR THOUSAND FEET OFF THE SICILIAN COAST WHEN THE PILOT SUDDENLY SAW THE ARMADA FAR BELOW...



AS IT BANKED AWAY, THE GUNS OF THE ESCORT DESTROYERS GROPED AFTER THE TINY GERMAN PLANE WITH VICIOUS ACCURACY. THE PILOT CALLED BASE EXCITEDLY...

ACHTUNG!
ACHTUNG! BLACK
ZERO TO BASE! ENEMY
FLEET APPROACHING COAST
FROM SOUTH-EAST! I WILL
GIVE APPROXIMATE
POSITION...



THE MESSAGE SPARKED OFF FEVERISH ACTIVITY ON THE GERMAN AIRFIELD AT SAMENTO, SIXTY MILES AWAY IN SICILY. THIRTY MINUTES LATER, SIX HEINKEL III BOMBERS ROARED OFF THE RUNWAY, EACH CARRYING TWO TORPEDOES.



THE ENEMY PLANES HEADED OUT TO SEA IN ATTACK FORMATION. MEANWHILE, ON THE TROOP DECK OF THE *PATHAN*, SERGEANT TOM MASKELL OF THE DURHAM LIGHT INFANTRY WAS LOOKING CURIOUSLY AT A WISP OF SMOKE...



CIGARETTE SMOKE, EH? NOW, I WONDER...

EVEN AS THE TOUGH YOUNG SERGEANT MOVED FORWARD TO INVESTIGATE, THE BRITISH FLEET WAS BEING GREEDILY WATCHED BY HOSTILE EYES FROM THE HORIZON...



Combined Operation

BUT GEORDIE, JOE AND BULL HAD OTHER THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT! THE LOOK ON SERGEANT TOM MASKELL'S FACE WAS CHILLING!



THE SERGEANT WAS A FEARSOME SIGHT TO THE GUILTY TRIO, BUT EVEN NOW A MORE DEADLY DANGER WAS THREATENING FROM THE PEACEFUL SUNSET SKY...



THE SHIP SELECTED AS A TARGET BY THE LUFTWAFFE FLIGHT LEADER WAS NONE OTHER THAN THE PATHAN, BUT ON ITS TROOP-DECK, THE SERGEANT WAS STILL PREOCCUPIED WITH A LITTLE MATTER OF DISCIPLINE!

COME ON,
YOU SLACKERS!
THE HOLIDAY CRUISE
IS OVER!

YOU'RE
TELLING US,
SARGE! LOOK AT
THAT!

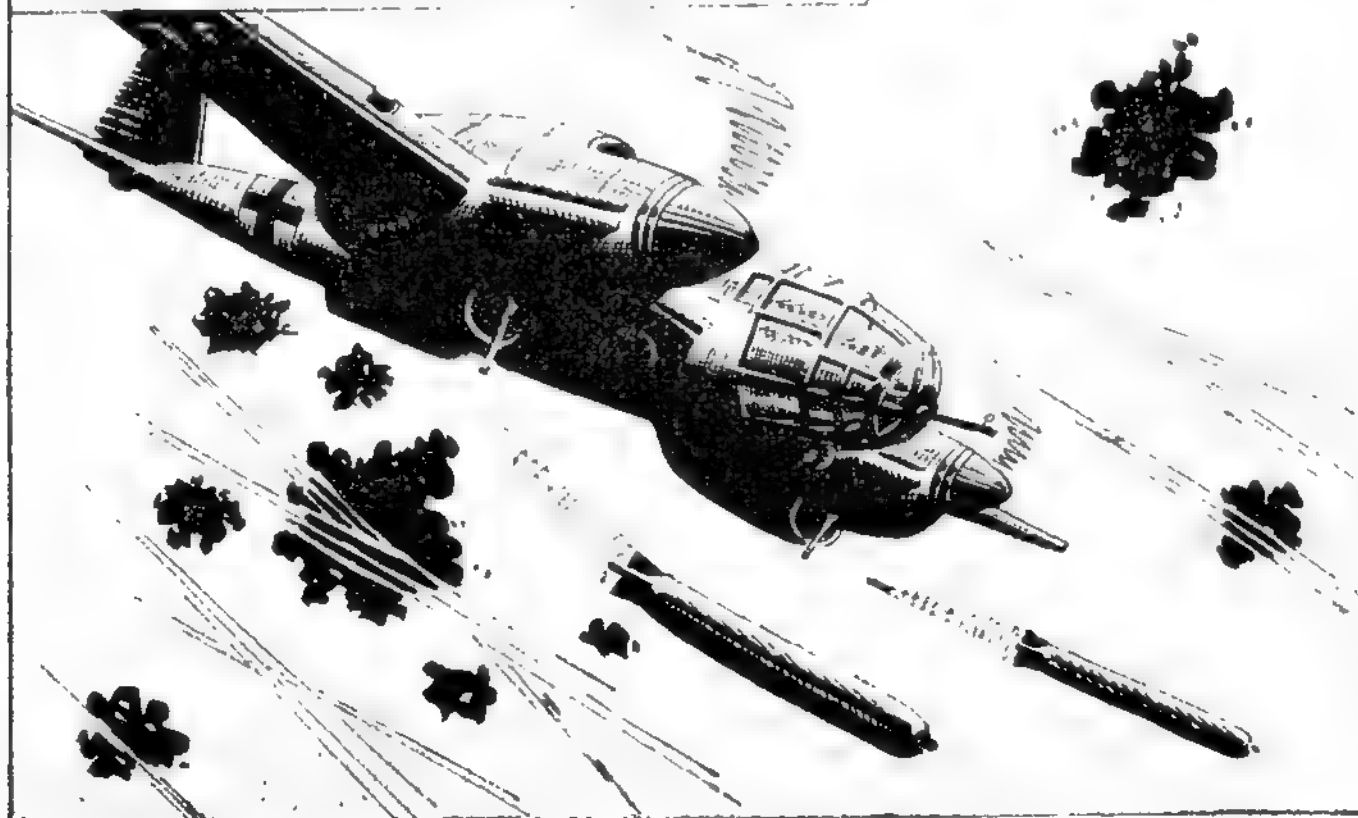


Combined Operation

THE THUNDEROUS ROAR OF AERO ENGINES UNDER STRESS AND THE ANSWERING BARRAGE OF FLAK RIVETED THE ATTENTION OF THE FOUR MEN. THEY LOOKED UP... AND TENSED. . . .



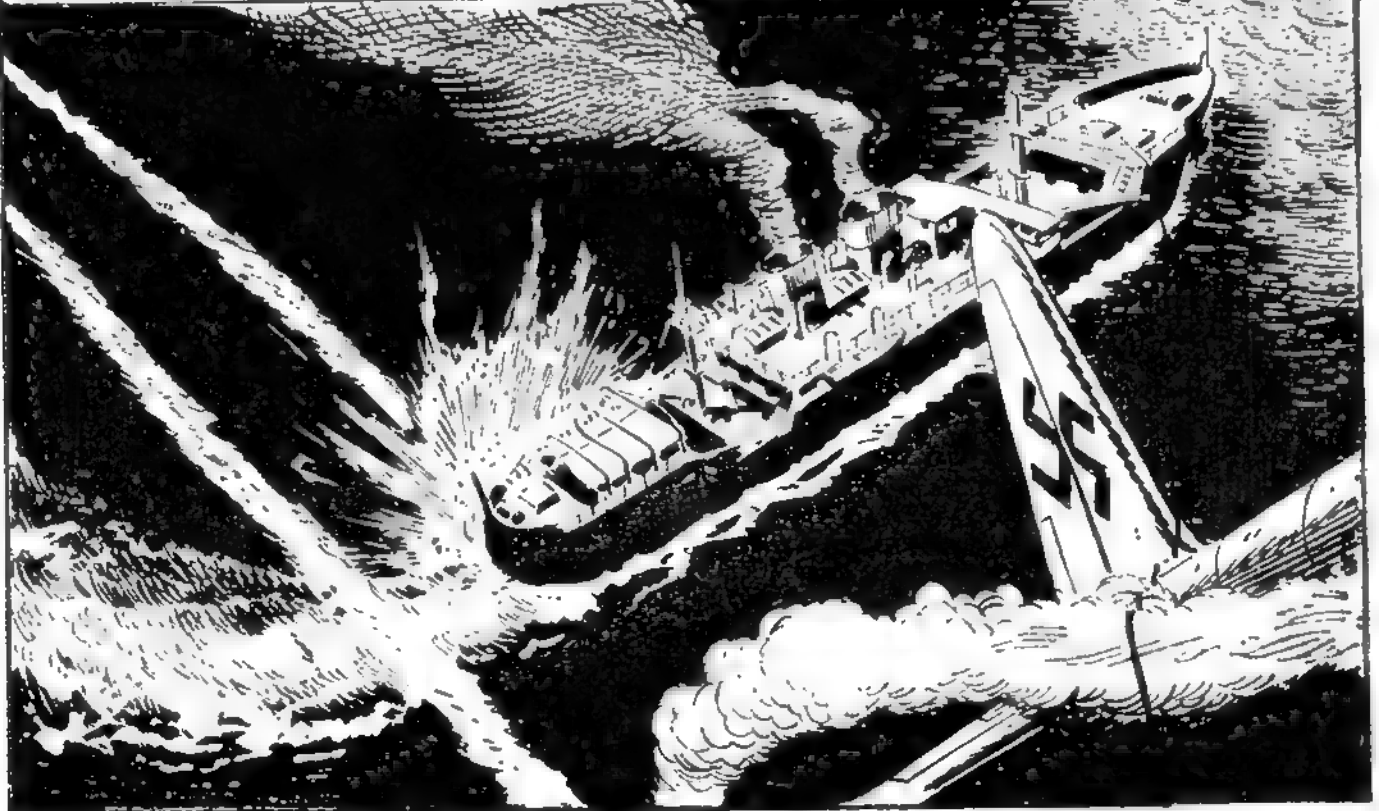
ALONE OF THE SIX ENEMY BOMBERS, THE LEADER WAS PRESSING HOME HIS ATTACK IN THE FACE OF VICIOUS ACK-ACK FIRE. THE HEINKEL HEADED STRAIGHT FOR THE *PATHAN* AT CLOSE RANGE . . .



THE TORPEDOES LANCED DOWN INTO THE SEA AND RAN TRUE. IN THE WHEELHOUSE OF THE TROOPSHIP THEY SAW THOSE TWO DEADLY ARROWS OF FOAM WHIPPING TOWARDS THEM...



UNDER FULL HELM, THE *PATHAN* HEELED TO PORT. ONE TORPEDO HISSED ACROSS HER WAKE EVEN AS THE HEINKEL SWEEP OVER THE SHIP AND WAS BRACKETED BY SHELLFIRE! THE OTHER TORPEDO STRUCK HOME AT THE STERN...



Combined Operation

THE SUDDEN LURCH OF THE *PATHAN* HAD FLUNG THE CARLEY FLOAT AGAINST THE ROPES WHICH LASHED IT TO THE SHIP'S RAIL. THE JARRING SHOCK AS THE TORPEDO STRUCK PUT TOO GREAT A STRAIN ON THE SALT-WEAKENED HEMP...



THE FLOAT HUNG FOR ONE AGONISING MOMENT OVER THE DARKENING SEA. THEN...



SERGEANT TOM MASKELL HAD BEEN FLUNG INTO THE SEA AT THE FIRST SHOCK. BULLER, UNBALANCED BY HIS EFFORT TO AVOID THE FLAILING ROPES, FOLLOWED HIM. ONLY JOE AND GEORDIE CLUNG TO THE FLOAT AS IT HIT THE ICY WATER.

OKAY, BULL!
WE'RE COMING
FOR YOU!
SERGEANTS
FIRST!



THE TWO SOLDIERS WERE DRAGGED PAINFULLY ON TO THE FLOAT, ONLY THEN DID THE FOUR MEN LOOK BACK TOWARDS THE TROOPSHIP AND THE DESTROYERS HURRYING TO THE SCENE.

DAMAGE IS ONLY SUPERFICIAL,
COMMANDER! OUR BULKHEADS WILL
HOLD LONG ENOUGH FOR US TO
LAND THE TROOPS AS PLANNED
TOMORROW! THERE ARE
NO CASUALTIES!

THAT'S
WHAT HE
THINKS!



Combined Operation

THE PATHAN HAD SURVIVED THE ATTACK! THE MEN ON THE CARLEY FLOAT LISTENED CHEERFULLY TO THE VOICE COMING FROM THE LOUD HAILER... BUT A SUDDEN UNEASINESS GRIPPED THEM AS THE DESTROYER TURNED AWAY...

GOOD SHOW,
PATHAN! RESUME
STATION!

HI, NAVY!
HI! THEY'RE NOT
GOING TO SEE US!
FOR PETE'S SAKE,
NAVY!

SILENT AND OBLIVIOUS NOW, THE DESTROYER SURGED OFF INTO THE GATHERING DARKNESS. UNSEEN, THE TINY FLOAT PITCHED IN THE HEAVING WASTE OF WATERS...



Chapter 2. **HOSTILE ISLAND**

THE BITTERNESS AND CHILLING FEAR OF THE MEN ON THE FLOAT INEVITABLY TURNED TO ANGER. AND STEWARD JOE HILL WAS THE TARGET...

WE'VE HAD IT! THEY'LL NEVER PICK US UP NOW! IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT, JOE, YOU AND YOUR ROTTEN CARLEY FLOAT!

HOW COULD I KNOW IT'D PITCH OVERBOARD?

BUT THE RASPING VOICE OF SERGEANT TOM MASKELL SILENCED THEM. THE VETERAN OF A TOUGH DESERT CAMPAIGN WAS NOT GOING TO GIVE UP WITHOUT A STRUGGLE!

SAVE YOUR BREATH, MEN! IF ANYBODY'S GOT A GROUSE IT'S ME! BUT I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU LAZY SHIRKERS THROW MY LIFE AWAY WITH YOUR OWN!

THE SERGEANT'S PLAN WAS TO MANHANDLE THE FLOAT BACK TOWARDS THE CONVOY. BUT JOE HILL, PALE-FACED YET ODDLY DETERMINED, OBJECTED...

IT'S NO USE, SERGEANT! THE TIDE'S MAKING FOR THE COAST AND WE'D NEVER PADDLE THIS BLOOMIN' CORK AGAINST IT! WE'D BEST SAVE OUR STRENGTH AND LET THE SEA TAKE US INSHORE!

Combined Operation

THERE WAS A KIND OF DIGNITY ABOUT THE LANKY STEWARD IN THIS DESPERATE MOMENT. THIS WAS A JOB FOR THE NAVY, AND JOE HILL WAS A NAVY MAN...

LET'S HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, SAILOR! I DON'T TRUST ANY OF YOU RUDDY HEROES, BUT I SUPPOSE WE'D BETTER LET THE NAVY COMMAND THIS HERE CRAFT! WHAT'S YOUR NAME?



JOE HILL, SERGEANT. STEWARD HILL! I KNOW MORE ABOUT BREWING TEA THAN NAVIGATING, BUT I WON'T LET THE NAVY DOWN IF I CAN HELP IT!

ALL THROUGH THAT LONG AND STORMY NIGHT, WHILE THE OTHERS HUDDLED TOGETHER FOR WARMTH ON THEIR FRAIL CRAFT, JOE HILL KEPT WATCH.



AND AS THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN STREAKED THE SKY, THE WEARY JOE LOOKED TOWARD THE EAST...

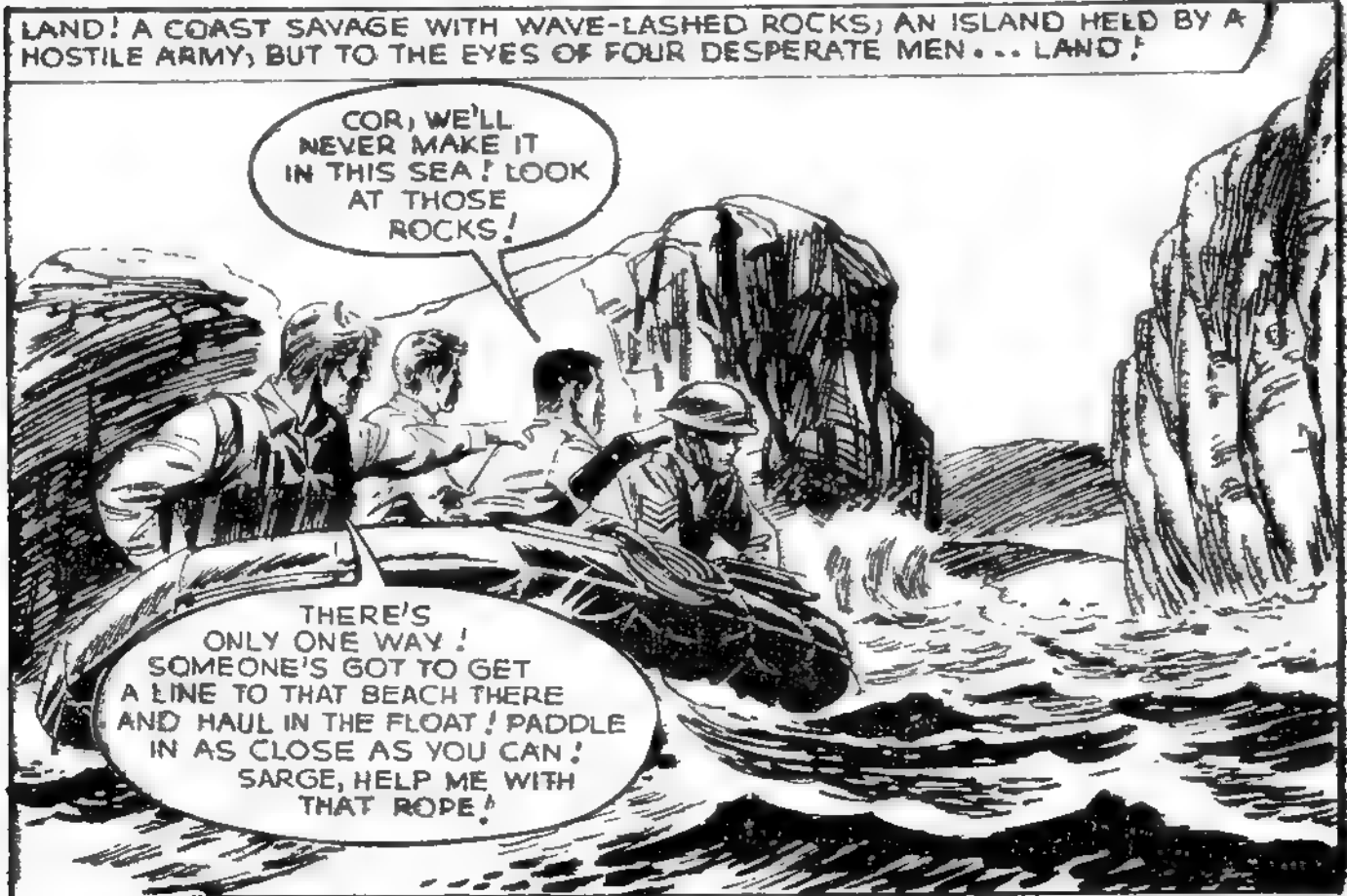
LAND, BY CRIKEY! WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT! SARGE, HEY, SARGE!



LAND! A COAST SAVAGE WITH WAVE-LASHED ROCKS, AN ISLAND HELD BY A HOSTILE ARMY, BUT TO THE EYES OF FOUR DESPERATE MEN... LAND!

COR, WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT IN THIS SEA! LOOK AT THOSE ROCKS!

THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY! SOMEONE'S GOT TO GET A LINE TO THAT BEACH THERE AND HAUL IN THE FLOAT! PADDLE IN AS CLOSE AS YOU CAN! SARGE, HELP ME WITH THAT ROPE!



Combined Operation

COOLLY, JOE HILL LASHED THE ROPE ROUND HIS WAIST AND PREPARED FOR HIS LONELY BATTLE WITH THE SEA.



THE THREE MEN WATCHED IN AGONY. THEIR LIVES HUNG ON THE END OF THAT LINE LASHED TO THE NAVY STEWARD'S STRUGGLING BODY...



WITH ALL HIS REMAINING STRENGTH, JOE HILL HAULED ON THE ROPE. SLOWLY, BUFFETED BY THE RAVENING SEA, THE CLUMSY FLOAT EDGED IN BETWEEN THE ROCKS...

HOLD HER, MEN,
HOLD HER!



AT THE LAST MOMENT, CAUGHT BY THE VICIOUS UNDERTOW, THE FLOAT CAPSIZED... BUT THE SHORE WAS WITHIN REACH!



Combined Operation

SERGEANT TOM MASKELL PULLED HIMSELF OUT OF THE RAGING SURF AND LOOKED AT JOE HILL. THERE WAS A NOTE OF RESPECT IN THE VETERAN'S VOICE WHEN HE SPOKE.



WELL DONE, JOE! YOU DID THE NAVY PROUD! NOW UP YOU GET AND FOLLOW ME!

THE NAVY HAD DONE ITS JOB...NOW THE SERGEANT TOOK OVER. AS THE HOT SICILIAN SUN ROSE ABOVE THE PARCHED AND HOSTILE ISLAND...

HURRY, MEN! THIS IS ENEMY COUNTRY!



THE FOUR MEN SCRAMBLED UNEASILY FOR THE COVER OF A GROVE OF OLIVE TREES, AND PAUSED...

WELL, THIS IS SICILY! I RECKON OUR TROOPS WILL HAVE LANDED ALREADY SOMEWHERE ALONG THIS COAST, BUT I HAVEN'T A CLUE WHICH WAY THAT WOULD BE. HAVE YOU JOE?

I HAD A DEKKO AT THE COLONEL'S MAP IN THE PATHAN'S WARDROOM. THE LANDINGS WERE AIMED SOUTH OF SYRACUSE AND THE TIDE WAS SETTING NORTH IN THE NIGHT. THAT WOULD PUT US BETWEEN SYRACUSE AND THE INVASION BEACHES!

THE SERGEANT MEANT TO REJOIN THE BRITISH FORCES, EVEN IF IT MEANT FIGHTING HIS WAY THROUGH A GERMAN ARMY WITH THREE UNARMED NON-COMBATANTS AT HIS SIDE!

ALL RIGHT, SO WE HEAD SOUTH AND TRY TO REACH OUR OWN FORCES! REMEMBER, WE'VE GOT HALF A GERMAN ARMY TO GET THROUGH! I KNOW YOU MEN ARE ALL NON-COMBATANTS, BUT YOU MAY HAVE TO DO SOME FIGHTING NOW! ARE YOU GAME?

COURSE WE ARE! NO ONE EVER GAVE US A CHANCE TO FIGHT BEFORE, THAT'S ALL.

Combined Operation

AS THE SMALL AND RAGGED PARTY SET OFF ON THEIR DESPERATE JOURNEY, SAPPER BULLER VIEWED THE PROSPECT OF A FIGHT WITH A RELISH WHICH LITTLE GEORDIE WALKER DID NOT SHARE!



THREE HOURS OF WATCHFUL TREKKING BROUGHT THE PARTY TO A COOL GROVE OF OLIVE TREES. AND THERE, SUDDENLY...



THE THROBBING ROAR OF AIRCRAFT ENGINES LED THE FOUR DESPERATE MEN TO THE EDGE OF THE OLIVE GROVE, WARILY THEY PEERED OUT...



HUDDLING BACK IN THE SHELTER OF THE TREES, THE MEN TURNED INSTINCTIVELY TO AIRCRAFTMAN GEORDIE WALKER, A GERMAN AIRFIELD... THIS WAS WHERE THE R.A.F. TOOK OVER!



Combined Operation

WITH THE OLD SARCASM BACK IN HIS VOICE, SERGEANT TOM MASKELL OUTLINED HIS OWN PLAN.

WELL, THE RAFF HASN'T GOT ANY IDEAS, BUT AT LEAST WE MIGHT GET A CHANCE TO GRAB SOME WEAPONS! KEEP DOWN TILL I GIVE THE WORD, MEN!

I'M TRYING TO THINK OF SOMETHING, SARGE!

THE GERMAN GUARDS WERE RELAXED. THE NEWS OF THE BRITISH LANDINGS ON THE COAST DID NOT ALARM THEM. THEY WERE SAFE ENOUGH HERE...

OUR RADIO SAYS THE BRITISH WILL BE FLUNG BACK INTO THE SEA! THEY WILL NEVER GET AS FAR AS THIS!

WITH A YELL FROM THE SERGEANT, THE NON-COMBATANTS' ARMY FLUNG ITSELF AT THE GERMAN GUARDS... ALL EXCEPT GEORDIE WALKER! FOR GEORDIE SUDDENLY HAD A PLAN OF HIS OWN!

KNOCK THEM DOWN, MEN!

COR! THAT'S AN IDEA!



TWO OF THE GERMAN GUARDS, CAUGHT UNAWARES, CRUMPLED UNDER THE SAVAGE ATTACK OF THE SERGEANT AND THE EXULTANT SAPPER.

THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR, JERRY!



Combined Operation

JOE HILL FLAILED INTO THE THIRD GERMAN BEFORE HE COULD USE HIS GUN. THE THREE MAN FIGHTING FORCE HAD WON ITS FIRST BATTLE... AND THE FOURTH MAN WAS BUSY ON HIS OWN!



QUICKLY, THE THREE GUARDS WERE DRAGGED INTO THE SHELTER OF THE OLIVE GROVE. THE GERMAN RIFLES AND AUTOMATICS CHANGED HANDS...



THE THREE PAIRS OF EYES WHICH MET GEORDIE WALKER AS HE PLUNGED PANTING INTO THE WOOD WERE COLD AND ACCUSING...



THE LITTLE AIRCRAFTMAN FACED THEM DEFIANTLY. FOR SOME REASON, HE WANTED THEM TO STAY AND WATCH THE AIRFIELD. BUT SERGEANT MASKELL WAS IN A HURRY...



Combined Operation

THE FOUR MEN LEFT THE SHELTER OF THE TREES AND BEGAN TO CLIMB. RELUCTANT STILL, GEORDIE WALKER LOOKED BACK...



WITH A SHATTERING ROAR, THE FIRST THREE MESSERSCHMITTS TOOK OFF IN TIGHT FORMATION. BUT THE WATCHERS ON THE HILLSIDE SUDDENLY SAW THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THE ENEMY FIGHTERS!



LOOK AT THAT PLANE! THE PILOT MUST HAVE GONE CRAZY!

NO HE HASN'T, MATE! HE'S JUST FLIPPING CROSS BECAUSE HE CAN'T RETRACT HIS UNDERCARRIAGE!

THE WHEELS WOULD NOT RETRACT! IN THE COCKPIT OF THE LEADING MESSERSCHMITT, SOMETHING LIKE PANIC CAUGHT THE NAZI PILOT AS HE THREW HIS PLANE ABOUT IN AN EFFORT TO FREE THE LOCKED HYDRAULIC SYSTEM.



DONNERWETTER!
I MUST GET THE WHEELS
UP BEFORE THE SPITFIRES
ATTACK!

LOOK
OUT, YOU
SCHWEINHUND!

FOR ONE FATAL MOMENT, THE PILOT FORGOT THE AIRCRAFT FLYING WITHIN INCHES OF HIS OWN. IN THAT MOMENT THE TWO WINGS TOUCHED ...



AACH!

Combined Operation

OUT OF CONTROL, THE TWO SLEEK FIGHTERS BECAME CRAZY
BROKEN WRECKS IN THE SKY! AND ON THE GROUND,
SERGEANT TOM MASKELL LOOKED THOUGHTFULLY
AT THE GRINNING GEORDIE!

GEORDIE, MY LAD, WHAT
EXACTLY WERE YOU UP
TO ON THAT AIRFIELD
WHILE WE WERE
SCRAPPING?

I TOLD YOU,
SARGE. USING MY
LOAF! AND RAMMING
LUMPS OF WOOD INTO THE
HYDRAULIC SYSTEMS OF
THOSE MESSERSCHMITTS!

MORE
PLANES
COMING.

THE LITTLE R.A.F. FITTER GRINNED...
HE HAD NOT BEEN IDLE DURING THAT
BRIEF FIGHT ON THE AIRFIELD...

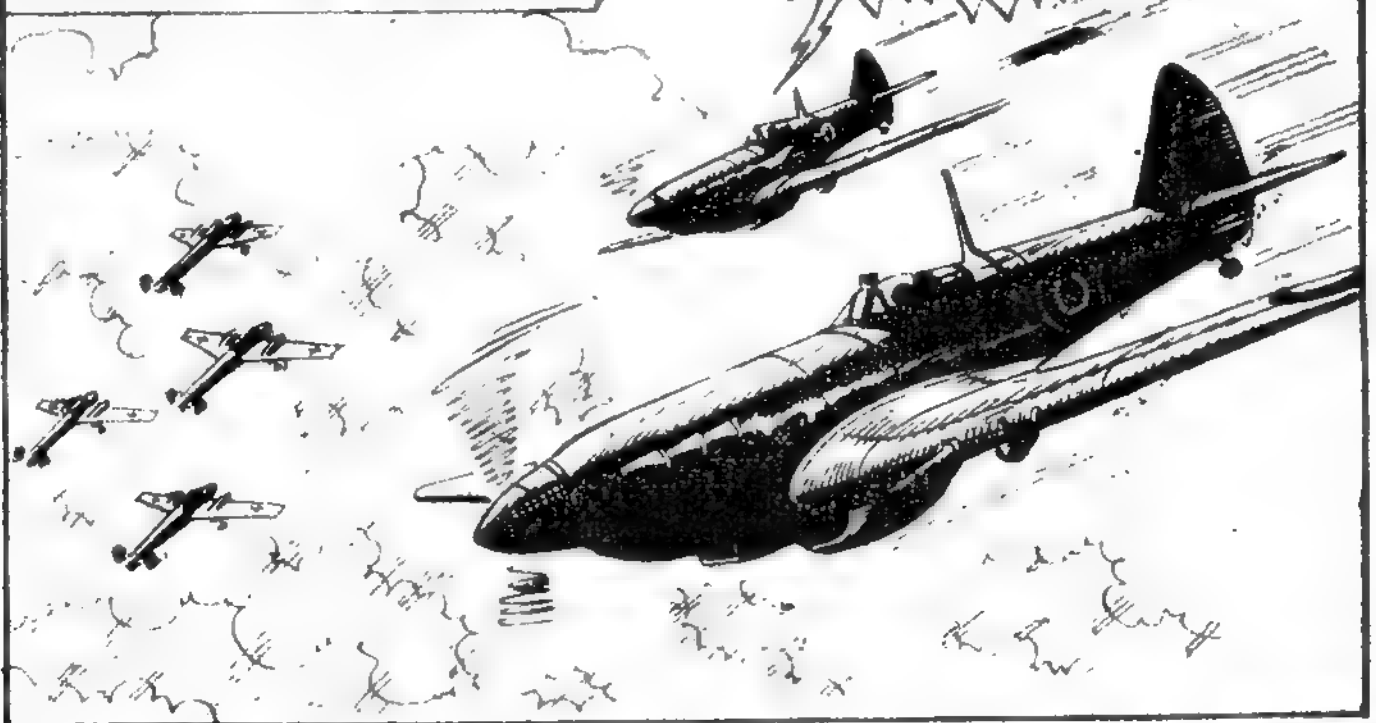
BUT WHAT WAS THE
POINT OF DOING THAT,
GEORDIE? EVEN IF THEY CAN'T
GET THEIR WHEELS UP, THEY
CAN STILL FIGHT!

CAN
THEY, MATE?
YOU JUST
WATCH THOSE
SPITFIRES!



THE WOODEN STAKES HE HAD RAMMED INTO THE HYDRAULIC SYSTEMS UNDER THE MESSERSCHMITTS' WINGS HAD STOPPED THE UNDERCARRIAGES RETRACTING... AND WITH WHEELS DOWN THE SPEED OF THE GERMAN FIGHTERS WAS DRASTICALLY CUT...

SOMETHING'S UP WITH THOSE JERRIES, PETER! THEIR WHEELS ARE STILL DOWN! FOUR SITTING DUCKS, OLD BOY! TALLY HO!

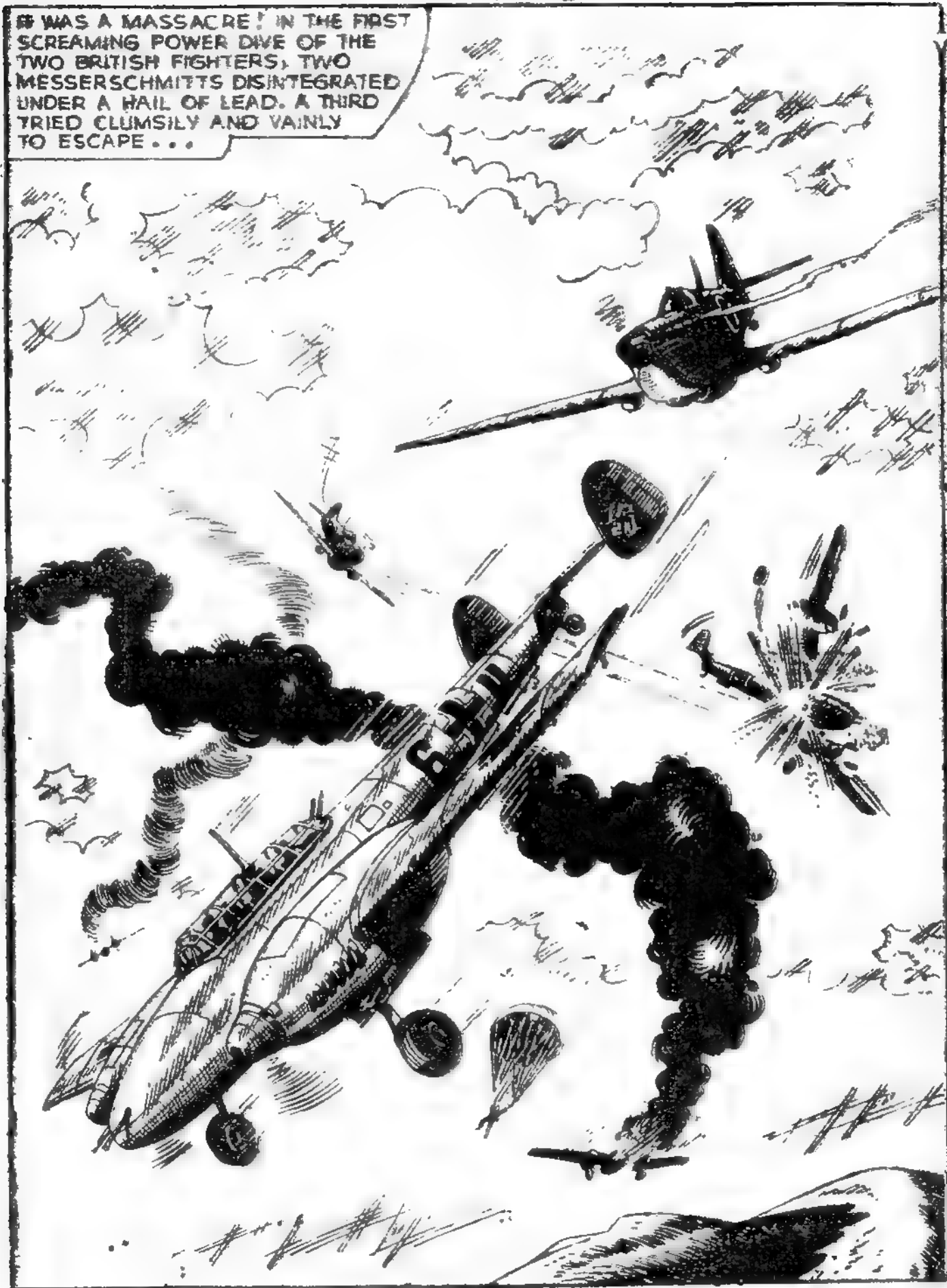


LIKE LETHAL BULLETS, THE TWO SPITFIRES SHOT VICIOUSLY DOWN ON THE SLUGGISH GERMAN FIGHTERS, COOL EYES WATCHED THE SIGHTS, COOL FINGERS PRESSED THE GUN BUTTONS...



SEE THAT, MATES! WITH THE DRAG OF THOSE WHEELS, THE JERRY PLANES ARE AS SLOW AS CARTHORSES!

IT WAS A MASSACRE! IN THE FIRST SCREAMING POWER DIVE OF THE TWO BRITISH FIGHTERS, TWO MESSERSCHMITTS DISINTEGRATED UNDER A HAIL OF LEAD. A THIRD TRIED CLUMSILY AND VAINLY TO ESCAPE...



THE FOURTH MESSERSCHMITT BROKE AWAY FROM THE RELENTING BRITISH PILOTS. BUT AS IT CAME IN TO LAND, ITS DAMAGED WHEELS FOLDED LIKE PAPER UNDER IT!

GEORDIE, MY LAD, I TAKE BACK ALL I SAID! THAT'S SIX JERRY-PLANES YOU CAN CHALK UP — YOU'RE A RUDDY WAR ACE!

NOT ME, SARGE! THAT WAS JUST THE RAFF'S CONTRIBUTION TO THIS LITTLE PICNIC!



THE TOUGH YOUNG SERGEANT RELAXED BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT. THERE WAS STILL A WHOLE GERMAN ARMY BETWEEN THE FOUR MEN AND SAFETY...

FOR NON-COMBATANTS, YOU BOYS AREN'T DOING BADLY! I FEEL A LOT BETTER WITH THIS BABY IN MY HANDS! COME ON!



Chapter 3. THE BRIDGE

ARMED NOW, THE FOUR MEN MOVED ON ACROSS THE HARSH SICILIAN TERRAIN. ALL THAT DAY AND THE NEXT THEY KEPT GOING, BURNED BY THE TORRID SUN, THREATENED CONSTANTLY BY GERMAN PATROLS...

KEEP GOING, MEN!



ON THE THIRD DAY, AS THEY FOLLOWED A DUSTY ROAD SOUTHWARDS TOWARDS THE BRITISH BEACH-HEAD...

TAKE COVER! JERRIES!



IT WAS THE FOURTH ALARM THAT MORNING. OBVIOUSLY THEY WERE NEARING THAT POINT OF SAFETY... AND OF DANGER... THE FRONT LINE!

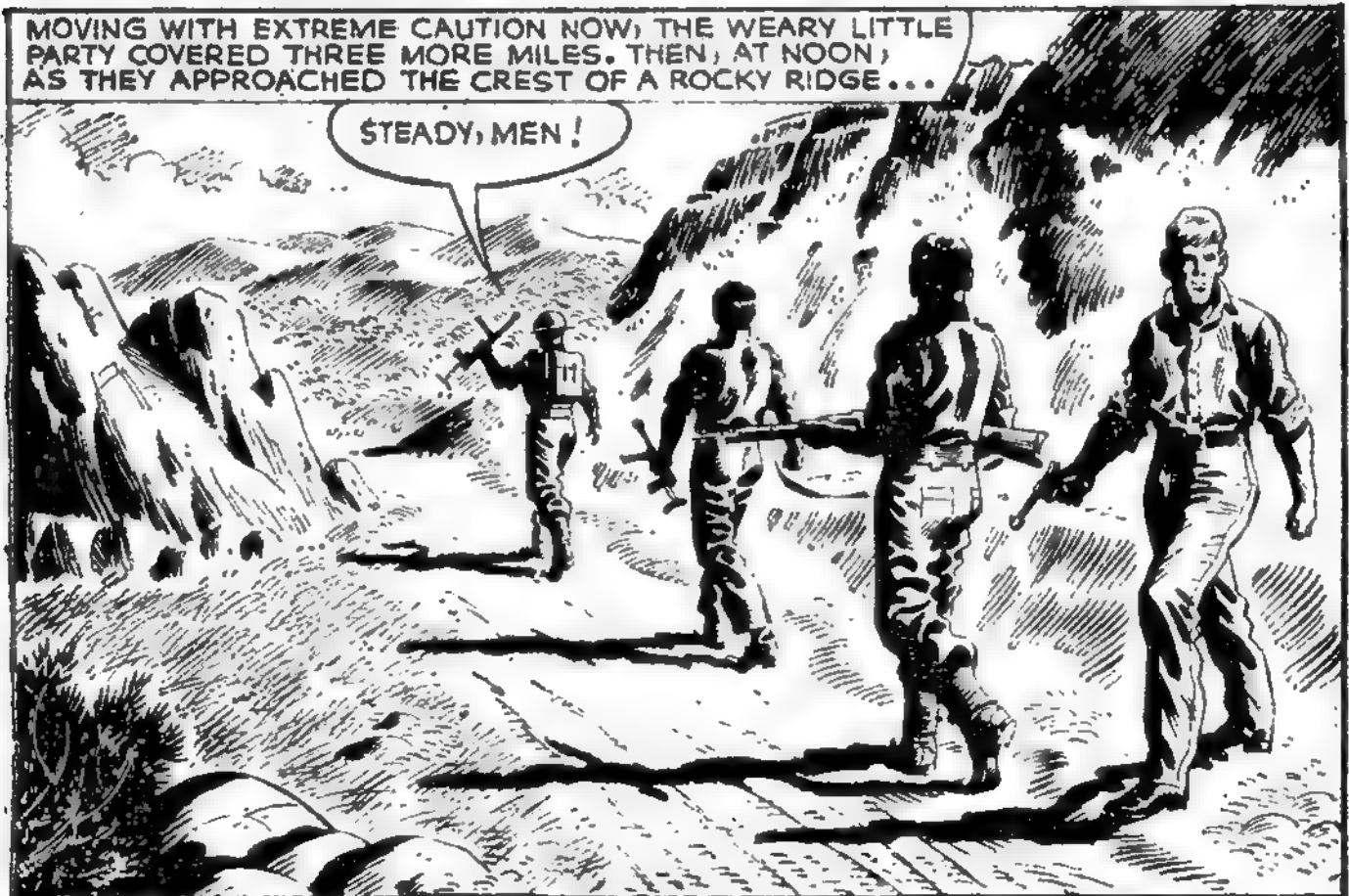
WE MUST BE NEAR THE FRONT LINE WITH ALL THESE SQUAREHEADS ABOUT! LET'S GET MOVING AGAIN... AND TAKE IT CAREFULLY!



TRUST ME, SARGE! I'LL WALK ON TIPTOE!

MOVING WITH EXTREME CAUTION NOW, THE WEARY LITTLE PARTY COVERED THREE MORE MILES. THEN, AT NOON, AS THEY APPROACHED THE CREST OF A ROCKY RIDGE...

STEADY, MEN!



Combined Operation

THE SERGEANT HAD SENSED THAT BEYOND THE RIDGE LAY DANGER...AND HE WAS RIGHT! IN THE RIVER VALLEY AHEAD, THE GERMANS WERE PREPARING FOR A FIGHT!



STEEL-HELMETED ENGINEERS SWARMED AROUND THE BRIDGE. A MACHINE-GUN DETACHMENT WAS TAKING UP POSITION IN THE STONY HILLS WHICH COMMANDED THE RIVER CROSSING.

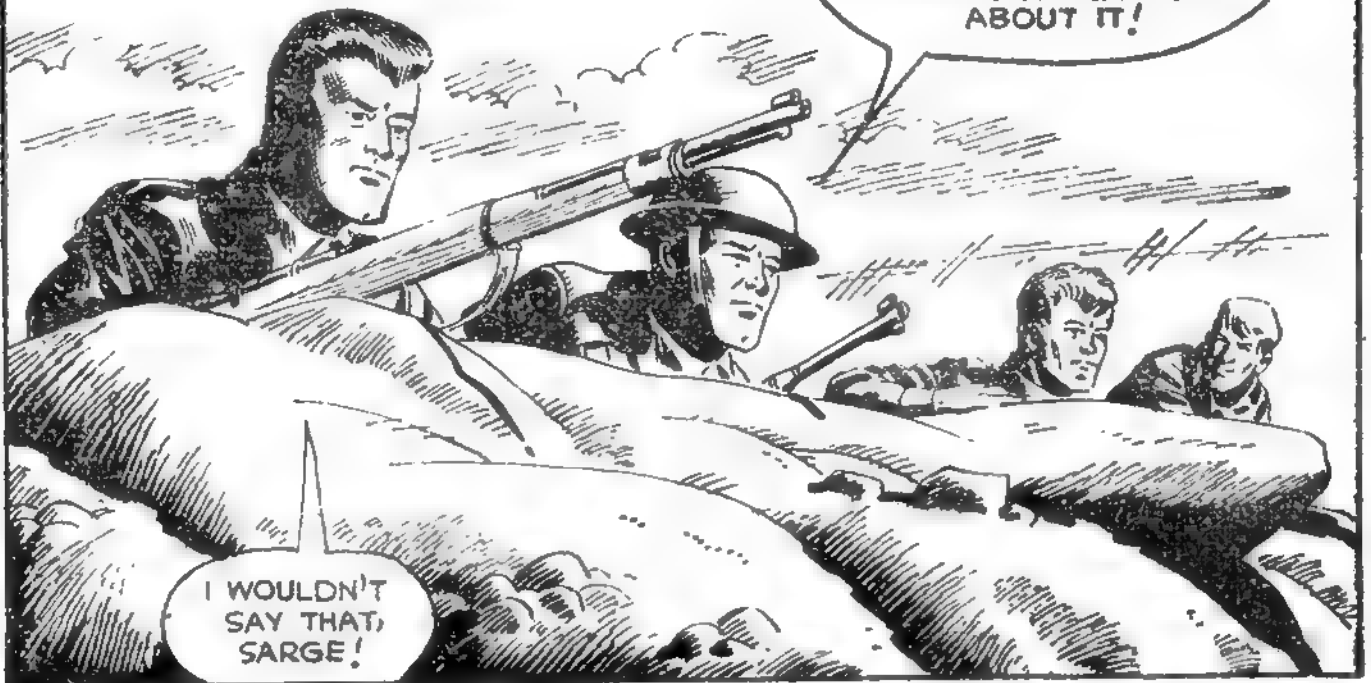
WELL, THIS IS IT, LADS! OUR TROOPS MUST BE APPROACHING ON THE FAR SIDE OF THAT RIVER... AND IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THE JERRIES ARE PREPARING A HOT LITTLE RECEPTION FOR THEM!



THOSE CHAPS DOWN BY THE BRIDGE, SARGE... I'LL BET THEY'VE BEEN LAYING CHARGES TO BLOW IT UP!

THE BURLY SAPPER LOOKED NARROWLY AT THE BRIDGE. AN IDEA WAS SLOWLY TAKING SHAPE IN HIS MIND...

YOU'VE GOT IT, BULL! WITH THAT BRIDGE WRECKED, A HANDFUL OF MEN COULD HOLD BACK AN ARMY HERE FOR A WEEK! AND THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT!



I WOULDN'T SAY THAT, SARGE!

THE THREE MEN STARED AT SAPPER BULLER. HIS BATTERED FACE WAS HARD AND GRIM... BUT HIS EYES WERE STRANGELY SHINING!

LOOK, SARGE, WHAT THE JERRIES CAN RIG UP, I RECKON WE CAN DISMANTLE! THEY'D HAVE PUT DELAYED FUSES ON THOSE CHARGES, AND WHILE THE GUARDS ARE STILL ON THE BRIDGE WE'VE STILL GOT TIME TO SAVE IT! ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS UNSHIP THE DYNAMITE!

THAT'S ALL, IS IT? YOU'RE CRAZY, BULL! IT'S FIVE HUNDRED YARDS FROM HERE TO THE BRIDGE! THE JERRIES WOULD SPOT US BEFORE WE'D GOT HALF-WAY THERE!



COULD A MAN CROSS FIVE HUNDRED YARDS OF EXPOSED HILLSIDE UNDER THE EYES OF THE GERMAN SOLDIERS... AND SAVE THE BRIDGE?

THEY MIGHT SPOT FOUR OF US, SARGE... BUT NOT ONE OF US! AND I'M THE ONE WHO KNOWS ABOUT DYNAMITE! THIS IS WHERE THE ARMY TAKES OVER!



Combined Operation

WITHOUT HEROICS, SAPPER BULLER OF THE ROYAL ENGINEERS CRAWLED OVER THE CREST OF THE RIDGE AND BEGAN HIS LONELY GAMBLE WITH DEATH!

HERE, BULL, THIS PENKNIFE MAY COME IN HANDY!

THANKS, MATE! BE SEEING YOU!

WE'LL TRY TO COVER YOU FROM HERE!

FOUR HUNDRED YARDS TO GO...THE DUST CHOKING HIS MOUTH, THE SUN SEARING HIS NECK, AND THE THREAT OF A BULLET IN EVERY YARD!

THESE CHAPS MAY BE NON-COMBATANTS... BUT THEY'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES!



ON THE BRIDGE, THE GERMAN GUARD GLANCED AT HIS WATCH, NOT LONG NOW! HE WOULD BE GLAD TO GET OFF THIS DOOMED BRIDGE AND ITS LOAD OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE . . .



BEHIND THE GERMAN'S BACK, SAPPER BULLER HAD REACHED THE RIVER BANK UNSEEN! NOW CAME THE MOST DANGEROUS PART OF HIS DEATH-CHEATING MISSION!



GOOD-OH, THEY'RE LASHED WITH TWINE! THANKS FOR THE KNIFE, GEORDIE!

FOUR VICIOUS STROKES OF THE KNIFE, AND THE LASHINGS PARTED. THERE WAS NO TIME TO DE-FUSE THE CHARGE... THE WATER WOULD NEUTRALISE IT...



BACK TO THE OUTPOSTS, MEN! YOU HAVE FOUR MINUTES BEFORE THE BRIDGE GOES UP!

ABOVE BULL'S HEAD, A GRATING VOICE GAVE AN ORDER IN GERMAN. A VITAL ORDER... BUT IT MEANT NOTHING TO THE BURLY SAPPER! PHLEGMATICALY HE SET TO WORK ON THE SECOND CHARGE.



I WONDER WHAT THAT GEEZER'S SAYING? OH WELL, I'D BETTER GET ON WITH THE JOB!

ON THE RIDGE, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GERMAN'S MOVEMENTS HAD NOT BEEN LOST ON THE SERGEANT. BULL'S TIME WAS RUNNING OUT... AND NOW A NEW DANGER THREATENED...



THE GUARDS HAVE LEFT THE BRIDGE... IT MUST BE DUE TO GO UP AT ANY MOMENT! AND ONE OF THE SQUAREHEADS IS NOSING AROUND!

ONE GERMAN SOLDIER HAD ORDERS TO PATROL THE RIVER BANK UPSTREAM OF THE BRIDGE. GRUMBLING, HE OBEYED... AND HEARD WITH SLUGGISH CURIOSITY A SOFT SPLASH IN THE WATER...

UHUH!
WHAT WAS
THAT?



IT WAS THE THIRD CHARGE CUT LOOSE BY SAPPER BULLER! THE GERMAN HALF-TURNED, REACHING SLOWLY FOR HIS RIFLE. AND ABOVE, ON THE RIDGE...

I'VE GOT TO GET THAT
JERRY BEFORE HE SPOTS
BULL! NO FIRING, MEN,
UNLESS I DO!



SERGEANT TOM MASKELL DID NOT HESITATE. SOMEONE HAD TO GET THAT INQUISITIVE GUARD — AND SILENTLY — LIKE LIGHTNING — THE YOUNG VETERAN SLIPPED OVER THE CREST.

DONNERWETTER!
A SABOTEUR!



Combined Operation

ALREADY THE GUARD HAD SEEN THE BURLY SAPPER UNDER THE BRIDGE. EYES GLISTENING, HE LIFTED HIS RIFLE, BUT HE WAS SLOW . . . TOO SLOW . . .

ACHTUNG!
YOU UNDER
THE BRIDGE
THERE!



TWELVE STONE OF BRAWN AND MUSCLE HIT THE GERMAN BEHIND THE KNEES IN A RUGBY-STYLE TACKLE... HIS SMOTHERED YELL OF FEAR STARTLED BULL, WHO HAD JUST CUT LOOSE THE FOURTH CHARGE.



SENSING THAT TIME WAS SHORT, BULL SET TO WORK ON THE LAST CHARGE. AGONIZED GRUNTS AND THRESHING LIMBS IN THE WATER TOLD HIM THAT THE SERGEANT NEEDED NO HELP!

QUIET, FRITZ! LET'S KEEP YOUR FRIENDS OUT OF THIS!



BUT THE KNIFE WAS GETTING BLUNT NOW. FRANTICALLY BULL SAWED AT THE LASHINGS. SWEAT POURED FROM HIS FACE. HOW MANY SECONDS HAD HE LEFT.

GET RID OF THAT THING FOR PETE'S SAKE, BULL! IT'S GOING UP ANY SECOND!

IT'S THE LAST ONE, SARGE!



Combined Operation

HALF A MILE AWAY, THE GERMAN SAPPER LIEUTENANT LOOKED AT HIS WATCH. TEN SECONDS TO GO... FIVE SECONDS... HIS NERVES TENSED FOR THE EXPLOSION...



THE BRIDGE HAD BEEN SAVED... BUT NEITHER BULL NOR THE SERGEANT WOULD EVER KNOW HOW CLOSE THEY HAD BEEN TO OBLITERATION!



Chapter 4. A MAN'S WAR

THE TWO MEN BEGAN THEIR PERILOUS JOURNEY BACK FROM THE BRIDGE. BUT ALREADY THE GERMAN LIEUTENANT, WHITE WITH RAGE, WAS PREPARING TO INVESTIGATE!

THESE PIG DOGS HAVE BUNGLED THE CHARGES! THE BRIDGE IS STILL STANDING AND THE BRITISH WILL BE HERE WITHIN TEN MINUTES! HEINE... SCHMITT... FOLLOW ME!



SWIFTLY, THE SERGEANT AND THE SAPPER RAN FOR THE COVER OF THE HIGH ROCKS. THEY WERE STILL TWO HUNDRED YARDS AWAY WHEN A GERMAN VOICE RANG OUT TO THEIR RIGHT!

HERR LEUTNANT! TWO MEN OVER THERE!



Combined Operation



THAT ONE PRECISELY-AIMED BURST CUT DOWN THE TWO GERMAN SOLDIERS LIKE A SHARP SCYTHE! BUT THE OFFICER WAS STILL RUNNING AND FIRING. BULL, WHO HAD TURNED TO AID THE SERGEANT, WHIPPED UP HIS RIFLE...



BULL'S AIM WAS GOOD! THE OFFICER TWISTED IN THE AIR AND CRUMPLED. BUT THE GERMAN HAD HIT SERGEANT MASKELL WITH HIS LAST SHOT AND THE VETERAN WAS HELPLESS WITH PAIN. THE WATCHERS ON THE RIDGE SAW BULL KNEELING BESIDE THE WOUNDED SERGEANT.



OKAY, MATE!

Combined Operation

GRITTING HIS TEETH, JOE HILL CLIMBED OVER THE CREST AND RAN TO HELP BULL.

GET BACK TO THE RIDGE BEFORE THE REST OF THE JERRIES WAKE UP. LEAVE ME HERE: YOU FOOL!

NO ONE'S LEAVING YOU ANYWHERE, SARGE! HERE COMES JOE. WE'LL GET YOU OUT OF THIS!



BUT THE SHOTS HAD DRAWN THE ATTENTION OF THE GERMAN MACHINE GUNNERS ON THE NEARBY HILL. THE HARD VOICE OF THE CORPORAL CUT SHORT THEIR MOMENTARY PANIC. AT THE SAME MOMENT, FROM THE HILLS ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE RIVER...

THE BRITISH HAVE CROSSED THE RIVER! WE ARE SURROUNDED!

FOOLS, THEY ARE SABOTEURS! TURN THE MACHINE GUN ON THEM!

GUNFIRE ON THE OPPOSITE BANK, CORPORAL! THE BRITISH INFANTRY ARE APPROACHING!



THE BARK OF MORTAR FIRE FROM ACROSS THE RIVER TOLD THE FOUR DESPERATE MEN THAT THE BRITISH FORCES WERE MOPPING UP THE GERMAN REARGUARD.

LOOK, YOU RUDDY NON-COMBATANTS, IN CASE I PEG OUT BEFORE I GET A CHANCE TO TELL YOU, YOU'RE THE BIGGEST BUNCH OF HEROES THAT I HAVE EVER MET. LUCKILY THE BRITISH ARMY'S NOT FAR AWAY BY THE SOUND OF THAT GUNFIRE OVER THERE.

BUT THIS LAST HOUR WAS THE MOST DESPERATE! ALONG THE RIDGE, THE BLACK SNUOT OF THE GERMAN MACHINE GUN TURNED IN THEIR DIRECTION...



THE HAIL OF LEAD RIPPED INTO THE ROCKS JUST ABOVE THEIR HEADS...

COR, HEROES ARE WE? WELL, EITHER SOMEONE'S USING A MACHINE GUN ON US, OR MY TEETH ARE CHATTERING!

IT'S A MACHINE GUN ALL RIGHT! THE JERRIES HAVE GOT THE BRIDGE COVERED! IT'LL BE A MASSACRE WHEN OUR TROOPS TRY TO CROSS.

JOE AND GEORDIE CROUCHED, WHITE-FACED AND SHAKEN, AS DEATH WHINED A FOOT ABOVE THEIR HEADS! BUT THE LIGHT OF BATTLE WAS IN SAPPER BULLER'S EYES!

TELL ME I'M CRAZY, SARGE, BUT WHEN OUR BOYS START CROSSING THAT BRIDGE THE JERRIES WILL BE TOO BUSY TO BOTHER ABOUT US! WHAT SAY WE NIP OVER THERE AND TAKE 'EM IN THE REAR?

ANY SELF-RESPECTING SOLDIER WOULD JUST KEEP HIS HEAD DOWN HERE, BULL, AND WAIT TO BE RESCUED! BUT SEEING YOU'RE JUST A BUNCH OF NON-COMBATANTS... I RECKON YOU COULD DO IT AT THAT!

BULL'S PLAN WAS AS FOOLHARDY AS ONLY AN AMATEUR'S COULD BE... BUT AT LEAST HE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE GERMAN MACHINE GUN CORPORAL'S PLANS...

ON THE BRIDGE, CORPORAL! THE ENGLISH!

CEASE FIRE!
TRAVERSE THE GUN ON THE BRIDGE! THE SABOTEURS WILL BE TOO SCARED TO SHOW THEIR HEADS NOW.... IF THEY'RE STILL ALIVE!

AS THE BRITISH FORWARD PATROL SET FOOT ON THE BRIDGE BELOW, THE HAIL OF BULLETS ALONG THE RIDGE ABRUPTLY STOPPED. HEART BEATING, SAPPER BULLER GOT TO HIS FEET.

OUR CHAPS ARE DOWN THERE, SARGE... AND THE JERRIES HAVE STOPPED FIRING AT US.

OKAY, BULL, IT'S YOUR PARTY! I'VE GOT ONE GOOD ARM AND TWO LEGS... I'M COMING WITH YOU!

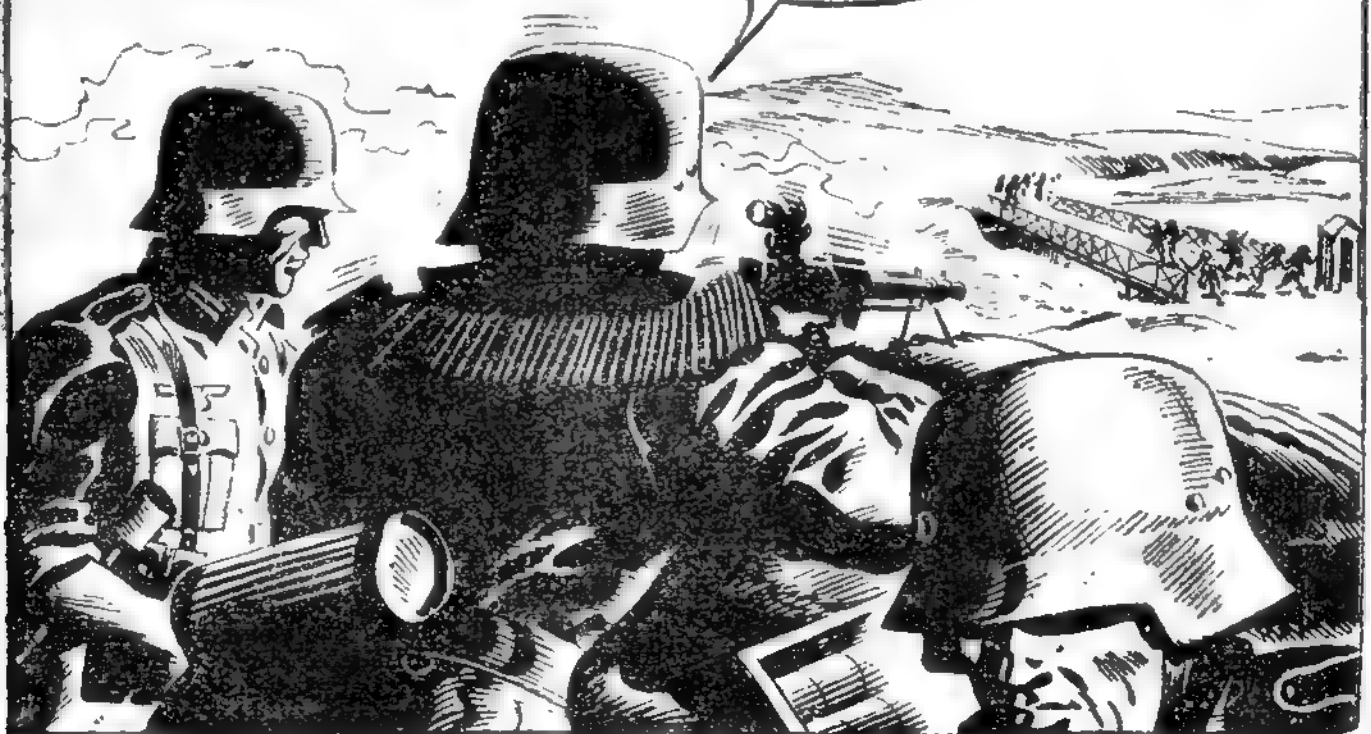
IN THAT BRIEF, EERIE SILENCE, THE FOUR MEN CREPT BACK ALONG THE RIDGE AND CROSSED THE ROAD. WEAK FROM LOSS OF BLOOD, THE SERGEANT LAGGED BEHIND . . .

YOU
ALL RIGHT,
SARGE?

KEEP...
GOING! THAT
GUN HAS STARTED
UP... THERE ISN'T
MUCH TIME!

THE FIRST BRITISH TROOPS HAD REACHED THE MOUTH OF THE BRIDGE BEFORE THE FIENDISH SNARL OF THE MACHINE GUN SCATTERED THEM . . .

SO,
YOU COME NO
FARTHER, ENGLISH
PIG-DOGS!



BUT THE THREE NON-COMBATANTS, THROATS
DRY AND WITH UNFAMILIAR WEAPONS
IN THEIR HANDS, KEPT GOING . . .



THE GERMAN MACHINE GUN
CREW STARED GLOATINGLY
DOWN AT THE HAVOC THEY
WERE CREATING ON THE
BRIDGE. THIS WAS THE
WAY THEY LIKED FIGHTING
... TO DEAL OUT DEATH
FROM A SAFE PLACE...



AT LEAST, IT HAD BEEN SAFE UNTIL
THREE NON-COMBATANTS DECIDED TO
TAKE A HAND IN THE WAR...

ALL TOGETHER,
MATES...
BASH. 'EM!



THE GERMANS HAD BEEN TAKEN UNAWARES. THE ONLY SPARK OF FIGHT WAS QUICKLY SNUFFED OUT BY HOT LEAD. BUT THE BATTLE WAS NOT QUITE OVER . . .

HERE, THE SARGE HAS COLLAPSED!



BULL! THERE'S ANOTHER BLOOMIN' MACHINE GUN OVER THERE!

FARTHER ALONG THE RIDGE, A SECOND GERMAN MACHINE GUN CREW CONTINUED TO FIRE ON THE BRITISH TROOPS PINNED TO THE BRIDGE. BULL LICKED HIS LIPS . . .

WELL HERE GOES, MATES! MIGHT AS WELL DO THE JOB PROPERLY!

COR, YOU'RE A GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT, BULL!



Combined Operation

THE SUDDEN SHATTERING BURST OF CROSS-FIRE FROM BULL'S GUN, ERRATIC AS IT WAS, HIT THE GERMAN MACHINE GUN POST LIKE A HURRICANE OF STEEL...



AT LAST, IN THE BLESSED SILENCE, THE THREE NON-COMBATANTS REALISED THAT THE BATTLE WAS OVER. FRIENDS WERE AT HAND! THEY HAD WON THROUGH...



BUT THE FRIENDS WERE NOT YET IN THE CLEAR / A MORTAR BOMB WHINED LOW OVER THE RIDGE AND EXPLODED VICIOUSLY BEHIND THEM! AND ANOTHER...

COR,
SUFFERING CROWS!
OUR OWN BLOKES
ARE SHELLING US...
AND AFTER ALL WE'VE
DONE FOR THEM!

DON'T
JUST SIT THERE,
YOU CLOT! GIVE
ME SOMETHING
WHITE!



ENCOURAGED BY THE SILENCE OF THE ENEMY MACHINE GUN, THE BRITISH TROOPS ON THE BRIDGE WERE BRINGING UP MORE ARTILLERY WHEN...

WE COULD
GO ON FIRING ALL
DAY AND NEVER
HIT 'EM!

HOLD IT,
CHAPS! THE JERRIES
ARE WAVING A WHITE
FLAG! FOLLOV ME!



Combined Operation

UNABLE TO BELIEVE THEIR EYES, THE SOLDIERS FOLLOWED THEIR OFFICER UP THE HILL. SOME MIRACLE MUST HAVE SAVED THEM FROM THAT HAIL OF LEAD WHICH HAD PINNED THEM TO THE BRIDGE!

GOOD SHOW, SERGEANT, YOUR MORTARS MUST HAVE SCORED A DIRECT HIT ON THIS GUN! AND BRITISH PRISONERS HERE, TOO!

WHO SAID WE WERE PRISONERS?

THE TROOPS LOOKED AT THE THREE SORRY FIGURES BEFORE THEM AND SMILED. IT WAS A SYMPATHETIC SMILE... THE SMILE OF FIGHTING MEN FOR THE HELPLESS NON-COMBATANTS WHO GET MIXED UP IN A MAN'S WAR!

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE GOING TO TELL US YOU CAPTURED THIS GUN POSITION AND WIPED OUT THE OTHER ONE? COME OFF IT, NAVY!

TAKE THEM DOWN TO THE BRIDGE, SERGEANT. THEY'VE HAD A ROTTEN TIME, POOR CHAPS!



THOSE SMILES RILED LITTLE GEORDIE WALKER. BUT THE BURLY BULL JUST SHRUGGED HIS SHOULDERS AND GRINNED.

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL THEM WHAT WE DID, BULL?

LOOK AT THE THREE OF US, GEORDIE! DO YOU THINK THEY'D BELIEVE US? THEY'D HAVE BELIEVED THE SERGEANT... BUT HE WON'T COME TO FOR HOURS... WHAT DOES IT MATTER, ANYWAY? **WE KNOW!**

PERHAPS THE PHLEGMATIC SAPPER WAS RIGHT. BUT IF HE COULD HAVE HEARD WHAT THE CAPTAIN WAS SAYING ABOUT THE BRIDGE HE HAD SAVED, EVEN HE MIGHT HAVE LOST HIS TEMPER!

THE GERMANS MUST HAVE BEEN SLEEPING TO LEAVE THIS BRIDGE INTACT! WE'D HAVE BEEN HELD UP FOR DAYS IF THEY'D BLOWN IT! AH WELL, IT'S SAVED THE ENGINEERS A JOB, EH?



Combined Operation

THE CAPTAIN WAS A KINDLY MAN. BUT AFTER ALL, HE HAD A WAR TO FIGHT. HE COULDN'T WASTE TIME TALKING TO THESE THREE POOR DEVILS...

WE FOUND THEM UP IN THE MACHINE GUN NEST, SIR! THE JERRIES MUST HAVE CAPTURED THEM SOMEWHERE. THEY SEEM A BIT DAZED.



SHELL SHOCKED, EH? WELL, IT'S A NASTY EXPERIENCE FOR NON-COMBATANTS, BEING MORTARED! GET THEM BACK TO SAFETY, SERGEANT! SOMEBODY'S GOT TO DO THE FIGHTING!

MEANWHILE, THE MAN WHO MIGHT HAVE TOLD THE TRUE HEROIC STORY, SERGEANT MASKELL, WAS BEING CARRIED BACK UNCONSCIOUS TO A BASE HOSPITAL. SOME WEEKS LATER, WHEN HE WAS FIT AND WELL AGAIN...



WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH YOUR LEAVE, SERGEANT?

I THOUGHT I'D LOOK UP SOME OLD FRIENDS OF MINE, SIR!

THE SERGEANT HAD TOLD THE STORY TO WHOEVER WOULD LISTEN TO IT IN THE MILITARY HOSPITAL... BUT WHO COULD BE EXPECTED TO BELIEVE IT? FEELING RATHER GUILTY, HE DETERMINED TO SEEK OUT THOSE THREE MEN... AND THE FIRST, GEORDIE, HE FOUND ON AN R.A.F. AIRFIELD AT CATANIA. THE LITTLE AIRCRAFTMAN HAD LONG AGO GOT OVER HIS ANNOYANCE...



GEORDIE WAS AS HAPPY TO GET BACK TO HIS OWN JOB AS WAS STEWARD JOE HILL...



Combined Operation

AS FOR SAPPER BULLER, HE WAS ALWAYS THE PHILOSOPHER. THE DESPERATE ADVENTURE THEY HAD SHARED WAS, FOR HIM, A HAPPY MEMORY TO LOOK BACK ON WHILE HE HEAVED AND DUG!

THEY'RE
WASTING YOUR TALENTS,
BULL! WHY DON'T YOU
LET ME TRY TO GET YOU
TRANSFERRED TO THE
INFANTRY?

WOULDN'T BE
ANY GOOD, SARGE!
BESIDES, SOMEBODY'S
GOT TO DO THIS DONKEY
WORK IF WE'RE GOING
TO WIN THIS BLOOMIN'
WAR! AND I'M QUITE
HAPPY NOW I'VE
HAD MY BIT OF
FUN!



ON THE LAST NIGHT OF HIS SICK
LEAVE, BEFORE HE LEFT FOR
THE FRONT AND THE FIGHTING,
THE TOUGH YOUNG VETERAN
DRANK A TOAST...

STEWART HILL...
AIRCRAFTMAN WALKER...
SAPPER BULLER... THE
THREE NON-COMBATANTS!
AND MAY I HAVE 'EM
WITH ME THE NEXT
TIME I GET IN A
TIGHT CORNER!

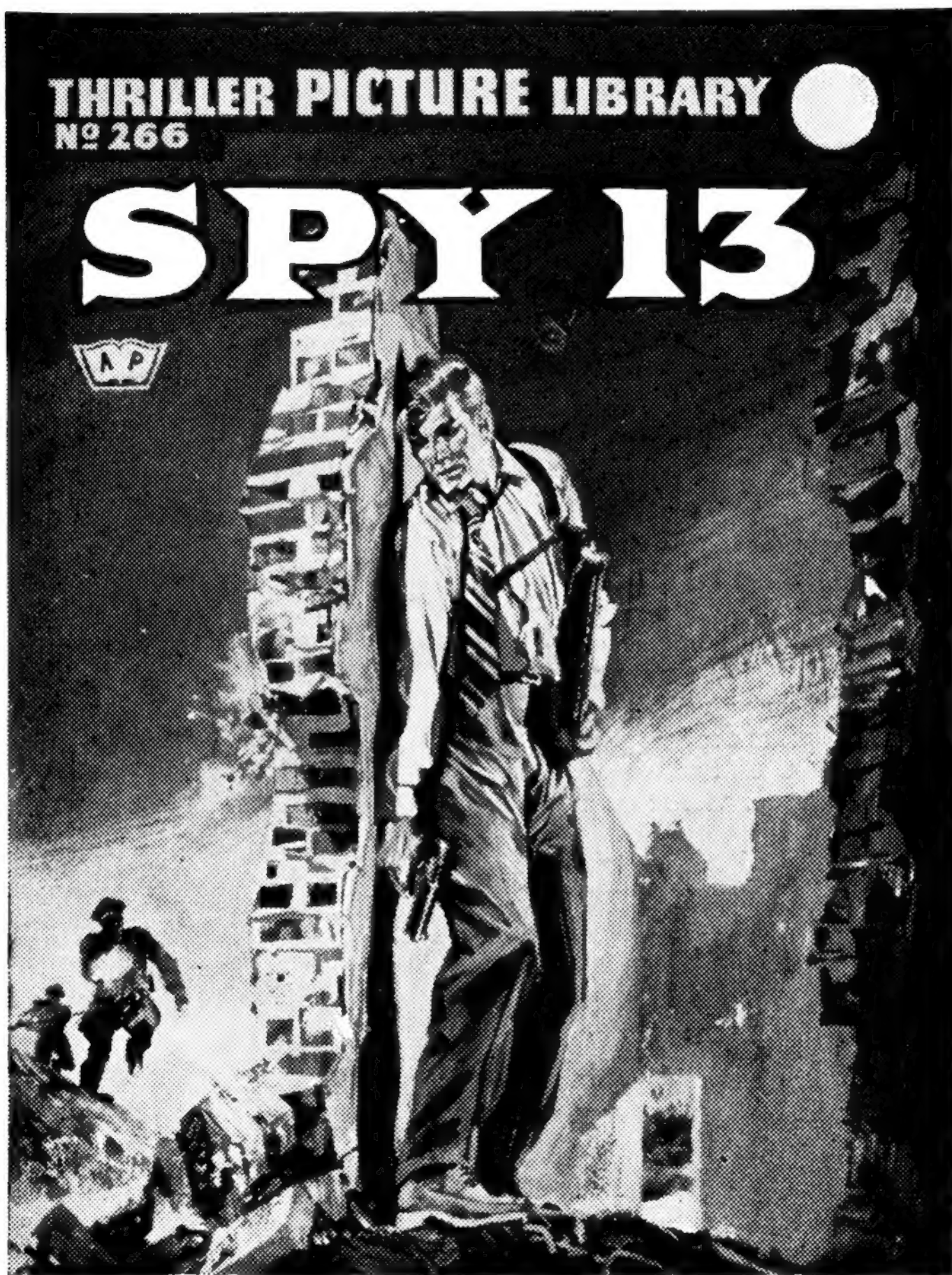


Printed in England by Messrs. Percy Brothers Ltd., Manchester 1, and published on the third Thursday in each month by The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: Tallis House, Tallis Street, London, E.C.4. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; South Africa, Central News Agency, Ltd.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. Kingstons, Ltd. WAR PICTURE LIBRARY is sold subject to the following conditions, that it shall not, without the written consent of the Publishers first given, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of Trade except at the full retail price as shown on the cover; and that it shall not be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition, or in any unauthorised cover by way of Trade, or affixed to or as part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever.

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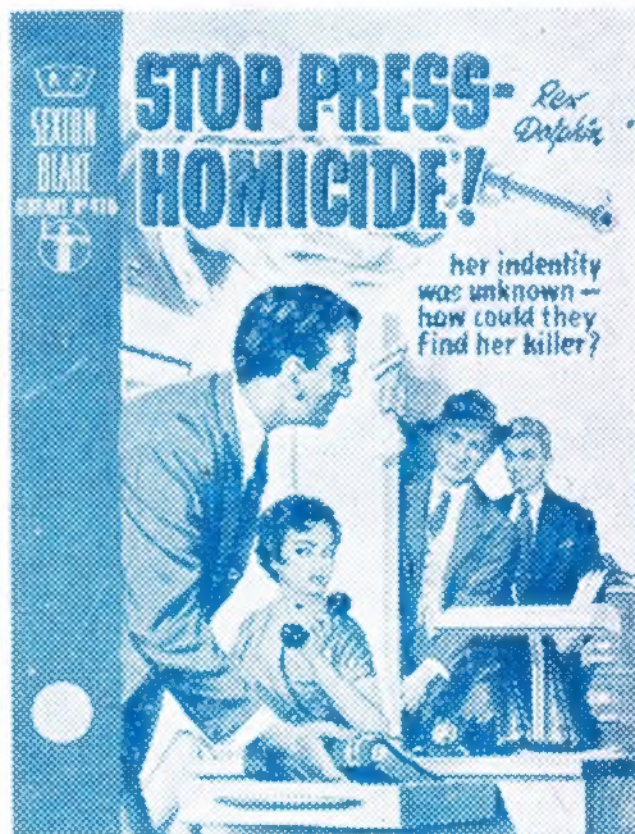
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